

Israel: The significance of the Bar-Noah gay shooting

Chris Marsden
5 August 2009

The shooting at the Bar-Noah gay youth club in Tel Aviv is testament to a society increasingly and bitterly divided, socially and politically.

The shooting resulted in the death of Nir Katz, 26, and Liz Trobishi, 16. Fifteen others were injured, four of whom remain in Ichilov Hospital, including two who are in intensive care.

The masked, black-clad gunman has not been identified or caught, and the police investigation is presently subject to a gagging order. All that is known factually is that he entered the centre on Nachmani Street and began firing indiscriminately with a pistol before escaping. Or Gil, a victim who was wounded in the shoulder and leg, told the media how people hid under tables and a bed.

Police Commissioner David Cohen responded by calling on people not to blame specific sectors of the community for Saturday's attack "regarding suspicions and possible directions [of the investigation]," hinting that it may not have been a anti-gay hate crime. He did so even as police have ordered the temporary closure of Tel Aviv's gay clubs.

Cohen's is only the most transparent effort to prevent discussion of the horrific crime and its significance. It comes amidst ritual denunciations of the killings by Israel's orthodox parties, such as Shas and United Torah Judaism, which are governmental partners of the extreme right coalition headed by Binyamin Netanyahu's Likud.

In reality, other than Labour, Netanyahu's rightist coalition partners subscribe to a strict anti-homosexual doctrine—citing the Torah with its declaration that a man who lies with another man is an "abomination" (to'eva). Lesbianism is not acknowledged in the Torah, but is forbidden by the rabbis on the basis of the biblical injunction, "Do not follow the ways of Egypt where you once lived, nor of Canaan, where I will be bringing you."

Shas leader Eli Yishai only recently centred his election campaign on a call to ban Jerusalem's gay pride march,

which he called the "filth parade." He refers to homosexuality as an illness and speaks of "people who underwent treatment and recovered." Nissim Ze'ev of Shas referred to gays as a "plague that could destroy Jewish Israel," stating that homosexuality should be treated "just as the Health Ministry dealt with the bird flu epidemic." Former health minister Shlomo Benizri of Shas last February blamed an earthquake on homosexuality asking, "Why do earthquakes happen? One of the reasons is the things to which the Knesset gives legitimacy, to sodomy."

These are the views held by highly influential layers within society and that make up one side of what is usually referred to as Israel's "culture war"—the conflict between the largely secular and socially progressive layers and the orthodox conservative camp.

Articles on Tel Aviv written in the aftermath of the shooting refer to the city as a centre of social tolerance, with its "municipally funded gay center" and so on. But it is spoken of with derision as "the bubble" by many. And as a *Time* magazine article pointed out, the city "is only a short bus ride from one of the more inflexible Orthodox communities in the country, Bnei Brak."

Within large sections of Israeli society, anti-Arab hatred mixes with anti-gay sentiment and hostility to secular and left-wing thought. In 2005, following a right-wing campaign to ban the pride march in Jerusalem, Yishai Schlisel, an ultra-Orthodox man, stabbed one man and two women. He told police he wanted to kill homosexuals "in the name of God." In 2006, he was given a 12-year jail term for attempted murder. Also in 2006, the gay pride march took place surrounded by 12,000 police officers. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, a leading ideologue of the settlers has proclaimed homosexuality "a crime which is punished by death according to the Torah."

The *Time* article, "Gay vs. Orthodox: A deadly turn in Israel's culture war?" quotes Saar Netanel, a former Jerusalem city councillor speaking of "two camps...my camp, for whom the temple is the Supreme Court and we believe in democracy, and we want a liberal and modern

country; and there is a part of Israel that wants a more religious country—some of them even want the rule of Jewish law, not a democracy. They don't believe in the courts—they believe in the law of the Torah.”

In reality, the socially progressive “camp” is built on very poor foundations: the elevation of cultural issues to the level of a political programme and its refusal to break with Zionism.

Netanel himself is a member of Meretz, the political wing of the peace movement. But Meretz, like the rest of the Israeli political establishment, proclaims itself to be a Zionist party and is incapable therefore of combating the growth of the far-right.

Netanyahu declared with regard to the shooting in Tel Aviv, “Ours is a country built on tolerance.” No claim could be less credible. Israel was built through the systematic expulsion of its existing Arab population. Its history has been one of ongoing and brutal subjugation within the Occupied Territories, appalling social deprivation within the refugee camps in neighbouring countries, and discrimination within Israel itself, where the pre-existing Arab population are treated as second class citizens.

This social and political reality is incompatible with any genuine and lasting social progress.

The media has noted how over the past decades liberal legislation has been passed with regards to the rights of gays. This does not, however, fundamentally alter the undemocratic character of the Israeli state.

While Israel's Declaration of Independence was modelled on the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the American Declaration of Independence, the Labour Zionists who ruled Israel for the next thirty years never gave it any substance in law. They did not develop a constitution or a Bill of Rights. They did not separate state and religion. Neither did they develop a liberal concept of citizenship that extended equal rights to all its citizens. Israel placed its Arab citizens under military law that only ended in 1966. Not only did it legalise the expropriation of Arab land gained by the expulsion of the Palestinians, it prohibited, until recently overruled by the Supreme Court, its Palestinian citizens from buying land in Israel. Political parties that contested Israel's right to exist were banned from taking part in elections. The draconian British regulations against terrorism remained in force until 1979.

The rabbis still exert enormous influence over the political and legal system. There is only an uneasy and ill-defined separation between the state's judicial system and the religious courts. The rabbis wield enormous power and influence in family law (there is no civil marriage or divorce in Israel) and are looked to by right-wing forces as the true judges of what is lawful, including Sabbath observance and

the right to travel on Saturday, making it all but impossible for secular Jews to live in Jerusalem. There is an uneasy and ill-defined separation between the state's judicial system and the religious courts.

In addition, the expansionist aims of the Israeli ruling elite have necessitated the cultivation and strengthening of social layers whose interests are inextricably bound up with the promulgation of religious obscurantism. This is because the right-wing settlers and their supporters conduct their drive to expand Israel into the occupied West Bank and Gaza under the demand for a biblical “Judea and Samaria.” They identify all manifestations of social progress and liberal thought, however confused, as a threat to the realisation of the goal of a Greater Israel that functions as an exclusively Jewish state, purged of its Arab citizens.

This standpoint is not combated by the supposedly secular parties, which share an expansionist vision with their more orthodox allies. Rather, the ultra-orthodox populace provides a social and political constituency for the Israeli bourgeoisie and its parties in their ongoing war against the Palestinians. Such parties are afforded great privileges and substantial funds by the state to carry out religious and social welfare work that helps consolidate their hold on sections of the most oppressed. The ultra-orthodox parties play a special political role in dividing the working class, denouncing the perceived liberalism of secular Jews as a threat to Jewish values, to be countered by ever increasing social control by the religious authorities.

All Israelis, even those opposed to the protracted war and occupation, pay a heavy price in the form of the terrible distortion of social, cultural and political life. The toxic growth of the religious right represents a mortal danger not only to the Palestinians, but to broad layers of Israel's Jewish population. This threat can only be overcome through a thoroughgoing political break with Zionism by working people. It demands not an assertion of identity politics and invocations of a “culture war,” but the championing of democratic rights alongside the fundamental assertion of the interests of working people and a programme of both economic and social emancipation from class oppression.



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